Vietnam 1964-65: Escalation versus Vietnamization   Col Anthony C. Cain, USAF, PhD

Background. In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson faced the defining decision of his administration, whether to abandon South Vietnam to Communist insurgents or to escalate US troop levels and roles in fighting the Communists. Even before Johnson took office in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination, advisors assessed that the Communist Viet Cong were winning the war in the South. Early in his administration, Johnson focused on an aggressive and liberal domestic agenda designed to transform the role of government and the condition of vast segments of US society. The last thing that he needed or wanted was a protracted war to steal the momentum from his domestic economic and social programs. The American president also did not want to appear weak or soft on Communism either at home or abroad. Like many in his administration, Johnson believed that the insurgency in South Vietnam was part of a larger global ideological struggle that pitted liberal democratic systems against a monolithic Communist threat. In this context, South Vietnam's fall to Communist insurgents could threaten the very fabric of American society.

The assassination of South Vietnam's President Diem in November 1963 (ironically only 22 days before President Kennedy was assassinated) to make way for a military regime did not endear the government to the people of South Vietnam. Like the Catholic Diem who failed to connect with the predominantly Buddhist population, the military leaders who took control after the coup complicated matters in the South by perpetuating corruption and failing to take the war to the Viet Cong insurgents. The effectiveness of the gradually professionalizing South Vietnamese Army deteriorated rapidly as soldiers in the field lost confidence in their leaders and the government. In a matter of months the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) lost credibility with the population it was supposed to defend and with its American advisors. Rather than pressing the enemy through small unit action, ARVN troops began to rely on centrally controlled and executed operations and firepower—increasingly American firepower—to pulverize areas suspected of harboring Viet Cong forces. This established the stereotype for the remainder of the war as larger US forces sought to find, fix, track, target, and engage insurgent forces through an attrition strategy.

Johnson's assessment of how to win the war was just as important as were his domestic agenda and his perception of the global context. He believed that a gradual escalation of pressure would signal US resolve and convince North Vietnamese leaders to abandon their support for the Viet Cong insurgents in the South. According to Johnson adminstration thinking, once the Southern Communists lost their main source of support, the ARVN supported by US forces could outmaneuver and defeat the insurgents.

Early in 1964 Johnson ordered covert attacks against convoy routes and logistical staging areas in Laos and Cambodia. He intended to interdict supplies flowing toward the insurgents while simultaneously communicating to North Vietnamese leaders that the US intended to prevent Saigon's demise. Communist leaders in the North concluded that Johnson intended to widen the war in the South and consequently prepared to increase their support and involvement to meet the shift in US operations. The now infamous Tonkin Gulf Incident (August 1964) and mortar and rocket attacks on the US base at Pleiku (February 1965) solidified the American perception that the South Vietnamese could not win the war without a larger US footprint and command role. Between mid-1964 and June 1965, US force levels in South Vietnam rose from 16,000 to 74,000. The escalation continued until reaching a peak of 543,000 in 1969.

Assessing the Road to Escalation. The Johnson Administration's decision to increase US presence in Vietnam represented the first step in a chain of strategic mistakes that ultimately led to failure for US forces and defeat for their South Vietnamese allies. Several contextual factors contributed to the failure.

First, success in South Vietnam depended on establishing a legitimate government that neutralized the appeal of the Communist message in that country. Like the French before him, Diem had ruled from the cities by favoring fellow Catholics, who made up only 10 percent of the population, for government positions. Systematic persecution of Buddhists by Diem and his agents aggravated the situation and prompted demonstrations by Buddhist monks. Diem reacted by ordering troops to fire on crowds and to arrest monks who assembled for the demonstrations. Dissent spread further when

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Diem refused to adopt land reform policies. Rather than implementing policies that addressed his constituents' concerns, Diem had driven many into the arms of the insurgents.

Second, US forces measured ARVN effectiveness against US standards; when ARVN troops failed to perform to those standards, US forces tended to take an active role in directing operations. This undermined the credibility and authority of ARVN officers and NCOs and paved the way for escalating American troop presence and roles in fighting the war. Anecdotally, the shift seemed to occur in 1964. Officers like future Generals H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell commented after early tours as advisors to ARVN units on the professionalism, devotion to duty, and fighting effectiveness of ARVN troops. After 1964, the character and effectiveness of the ARVN had deteriorated to the point where the only apparent solution was for US forces to lead operations. Predictably, the already demoralized ARVN forces stepped aside and allowed the US forces to take the lead.

Finally, Johnson's refusal to clear US troops to operate on the ground in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia provided the insurgents and the North Vietnamese sanctuaries from which to launch operations, resupply their troops, and retreat when pressed too hard. This allowed the scope and the pace of the war in the South to proceed according to Communist strategies and desires. Moreover, interdiction operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia presumed supply consumption rates that were completely out of touch with actual Viet Cong requirements as long as the insurgents retained the operational initiative.

Implications for Current Operations. Just as the principle of "location, location, location" determines success in Real Estate, the principle of "legitimacy, legitimacy, legitimacy" determines success when conducting counter-insurgency operations. The first step in building perceptions of legitimacy among indigenous populations is to assess what they expect from their government. In Vietnam, equal representation, land reform, and national identity were basic requirements for any South Vietnamese democratic government to be legitimate. In Iraq, MNF-I efforts must emphasize the illegitimate nature of the former regime as well as the absence of any positive agenda offered by the insurgents. The international press has reported on desires of the average Iraqi citizen for a "better way of life," information operations must emphasize that the only path toward a better life lies in abandoning the old regime and fighting the insurgents. But this is a battle for an Iraqi government to win rather than for an outside agent to fight and win for the Iraqi people.

Along similar lines, increasing the role of outside combatants in a counter-insurgency campaign gives the insurgents a conceptual weapon because it is tacit acknowledgement that the government cannot execute its primary responsibility of protecting its citizens. The history of counter-insurgency warfare points to the persistent use of disinformation and criticism of the government along these lines. Despite the fact that the insurgents are the ones who bring suffering and misery to the locals, the message that "if the government were legitimate, it would protect you from us," still seems to resonate. Again, heavy-handed tactics by outside troops or occupation forces only emphasizes the weak role played by host governments. Therefore, increasing foreign troop presence and roles seems to be the wrong approach when waging a counter-insurgency campaign—unless there it is certain that in doing so the foreign forces can permanently defeat the enemy and withdraw quickly to allow host government forces to assume their proper role as protectors.

Escalation also sends signals to the American public that ongoing strategies are failing. While a majority of Americans in the mid-1960s supported escalating troop levels in South Vietnam to win the war, few could articulate what winning the war meant in terms that mattered on the ground. Ultimately, Americans reached a point at which they demanded that their government reconcile the fiscal and human costs of the war with the requirement to "win." Post-Vietnam America has had a low tolerance for unbridled escalation or investment in failing overseas military ventures. This may be especially true when US forces have trouble distinguishing the host population from enemy combatants, and when the enemy persists in using brutal—even barbaric—asymmetric strategies against civilians and military personnel alike.

Finally, escalation can provide a degree of legitimacy to the enemy. The Johnson administration's decision to increase US troop presence in South Vietnam came after it was clear that the military junta that replaced the Diem regime was not going to wage an effective military or domestic campaign to secure the country against Communism. Although it signaled Johnson's resolve to stand firm against Communism, it also signaled what the average South Vietnamese citizen already knew—that the government was incapable of serving their interests. Faced with the alternative of choosing a corrupt South Vietnamese government backed by massive US firepower or a Communist message that promised a better day through land reform and national unification, many South Vietnamese chose the latter as the better of two pretty bad alternatives.